

### THE SIX KINGS OF CHRISTMAS

The six kings of Christmas. That is the subject for Christmas Day. I know we have just been singing about three kings, not six. The Six Kings of Orient. But I can't sit. Three in the night. The last Sabbath, I read Scripture Lesson. And another is Luke's account of that first Christmas. Six kings. And which of them, may I ask, is really your king?

I. ~~But~~ The first three, the three kings of Orient, are not kings at all. The Bible simply calls them wise men. It does not even say there were three of them. It was five hundred years later before legend and tradition transformed them into kings, and it was another two hundred years before an English monk named the Venerable Bede gave them names. The first king was Melchior: old and with a long white beard, and bearing a gift of gold. The second king was Caspar: youthful, smooth-faced, red-cheeked, bring fragrant incense to Bethlehem. And the third king was Dalthazar, dark of face, bearded, and bearing a gift of myrrh.

There is a recent American novel which makes one of these kings a Korean from Pyongyang. I ~~think~~ <sup>think</sup> that, is going a little too far, but it shows just how little we really know about the three kings of the East. Actually, they were probably only Persian fortune tellers, watching the stars and trying to read the future. But they were wise. Wise enough not to pretend to be kings, not to pretend to be something they were not.

Which is wiser that some of us at Christmas time. How often we become so busy keeping up our "image", pretending to be something we are not, that we have no time left at Christmas to look for the King--the King who alone can show us not what we should pretend to be, but what we should really be. Oh, how we need the King, and the wise men knew it. "Where is he who is born king of the Jews," they asked on Christmas Day, "for we have seen his star in the east, and have come to worship him."

II. The fourth king of Christmas is Herod. If it is a king of the Jews the wise men want, here he is: Herod, King of Judaea. He was handsome like a king, and when he was young he was famous for his charm. But he had the heart of a monster, and no one in his right mind would worship King Herod. "A beautiful beast", is one description of him (Renan). His whole family was bad. His father had betrayed Jerusalem to the Romans, and watched without emotion while foreign soldiers slaughtered Jewish priests at the altar. Herod had bribed his way to the kingship. That was one thing he could do well. If you are going to bribe, his father had taught him, bribe ~~large~~ <sup>big</sup>.

But his <sup>big</sup> bribes <sup>did not really</sup> only ~~made~~ <sup>only</sup> him a king, ~~not~~ <sup>only</sup> a king, ~~He was just~~ <sup>a cheat-pony of the Emperor</sup> another of the Romans' collaborating princelings. King of the Jews? He was not even a Jew. He was more Arab than Jew. "The Idumaeon", they called him. The wise men may not have been kings, but they were more royal than Herod. ~~At least~~ <sup>At least</sup> they, at least were looking for ~~the~~ <sup>a king</sup> King. All Herod was looking for that Christmas was enemies. He was pathologically afraid of potential rivals <sup>and had even suspected enemies without mercy.</sup> he suspected his brother-in-law and murdered him. He <sup>was</sup> ~~murdered~~ his wife's mother; ~~and~~ <sup>and</sup> murdered her.

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his wife's grandfather, the old man who should have been king. Herod had ten wives, and loved only one of them, but that was the one he murdered. His sick mind trusted no one. Then he began to murder his sons, one by one. "I had rather be Herod's pigs than Herod's sons," said Augustus Caesar. Herod's last official act, before he died, was to order his eldest son and heir strangled to death, then he gathered the leaders of the Jews in the stadium and told his soldiers to butcher them when his death was announced so that there would be real grief in Jerusalem at his passing.

He did build a temple. I almost forgot that. That much at least can be said for him. But does it really comfort you to know that even the worst sinner does something good at Christmas time? Herod and his temple are a lesson on the futility of works-righteousness. The good things we do are never enough. A little gift for a worthy cause? ~~Even~~ Building a temple? It is not enough. That's not what God wants from ~~you~~ at Christmas. He wants your heart. ~~You can't bribe God, not even with a new church.~~ Herod, who bribed his way to the kingship, tried to bribe his way into heaven, ~~then~~ <sup>he said</sup> the temple, ~~but~~ <sup>when what was wanted was his heart?</sup> after Christmas he was back, unchanged, butchering babies in Bethlehem, and still looking everywhere for enemies. He's not the King for Christmas.

<sup>Perhaps</sup> ~~but~~ will the fifth King of Christmas <sup>will</sup> be ~~any~~ better? He is at least more powerful. He is Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus Augustus. "In those days," says Luke, "there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed."

Augustus was one of the most powerful men who ever lived. He was the first, and perhaps the greatest, of the Roman Emperors. He was King of the world. <sup>(3)</sup> But not the kind of a King we need for Christmas. He was too careful, too calculating, too ruthless and too selfish for that. While Herod is looking for enemies at Christmas, this King is looking for money. He wants to tax the whole world. Well, almost the whole Roman world. All except Roman doctors.

This is a strange thing, and it throws light on his character. <sup>Some</sup> Part of his selfishness <sup>was</sup> a brooding preoccupation with his own poor health. He had the itch; he had rheumatism in his left leg; he had arthritis in his right hand; and "when the wind was from the south he had catarrh". (Durant, p. 227). He was already old at 35, and spent so much time with doctors that finally in gratitude he exempted all Rome's physicians from taxation.

~~He did not exempt them.~~ <sup>He did not exempt them.</sup> ~~But not~~ Jewish carpenters. <sup>He</sup> wanted Joseph's money, and brought ~~him~~ all the way down to Bethlehem for the tax enrollment. What did he need Joseph's money for? When he was only 18 years old, Octavius had inherited thirty or forty million dollars from his uncle, Julius Caesar, and had parlayed that inheritance into the most powerful Empire the world had ever known. No detail escaped his attention. He planned everything. He wrote out his speeches and read them word for word, so he would make no mistakes. He left nothing to chance. Suetonius says he even wrote out his conversations with his wife in advance. Cold and careful, <sup>and completely selfish</sup> ~~that is no King for Christmas.~~

a good King for Rome but no kind of a King at all for the ages. When he died they made him a god. But what the ages need for a King, is a God who will make himself man in us.

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But is the sixth king of Christmas any better? He was a little thing, crying in his mother's arms, and desperately poor. <sup>He was a little</sup> ~~No match~~ <sup>for</sup> Caesar Augustus. Van Loon paints the contrast this way:

"Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus Augustus was living in a palace on the Palatine Hill...ruling his empire... Mary the wife of Joseph the Carpenter was tending her little boy, born in a stable in Bethlehem.

"This is a strange world.

!Before long the palace and the stable were to meet in open combat.

"And the stable was to emerge victorious". (Story of Mankind)

Incredible but true, for the manger of Bethlehem cradled a King. This is the greatest, gladdest fact in the history of the world, and it makes all Christmases merry. Jesus, the Babe of Bethlehem, is King of Kings, and Lord of Lords, and Prince of Peace. <sup>Oh, what a King.</sup> King Herod murdered his enemies. This King forgave them; and told us to love our enemies. He forgives more than enemies; he will forgive you too. Caesar Augustus, the richest king in the world, only wanted to be richer. This King became poor that we might be rich. He is himself the first and perfect Christmas gift, the gift of God's love, God's only Son and ~~the~~ <sup>our</sup> only Saviour, ~~of our souls.~~

*And how do we receive him? An English poet - "We entertain him"*

So today is Christmas, and the King has come. But how did you really receive him?

"Now if His Majesty, our sovereign lord," says <sup>an English</sup> ~~the~~ poet,  
Should of his own accord  
Friendly himself invite,  
And say 'I'll be your guest tomorrow night,'  
How we should stir ourselves, call and command  
All hands to work! 'Let no man idle stand!

"Set me fine Spanish tables in the hall;  
See they be fitted all;  
Let there be room to eat  
And order taken that there want no meat...

"But at the coming of the King of Heaven  
All's set at six and seven;  
We wallow in our sin,  
Christ cannot find a chamber in the inn.  
We entertain Him always like a stranger,

And, as at first, still lodge Him in the manger." (Anonymous, Oxford Bk. 181)

*"We entertain him always like a stranger, and as at first, still lodge him in the manger." Is that true. Don't let it be true any more. Don't leave him in the manger this Christmas. Give the King at long last his palace at long last, the only palace he wants here, the palace of your heart.*

*'O Holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us we pray. Cast out our sin, and enter in. Be born in us, today' Amen*

*And all he asks is a manger to be born in, and your heart to live in. Don't leave him in the manger - that's for times. But Jesus is past -*

And which of them, may I ask, is yours.

① ~~Don't make them your king~~ They were probably among the best of the scientists of their time, but human wisdom, even at its best is a shifting thing, <sup>and today's</sup> ~~what today's~~ wisdom is tomorrow's superstition. Get all you can of the wisdom of your time, but don't make it king.

The wisest part of the wise men's wisdom was that they were looking for something more. They didn't pretend to be kings, something they were not.

② If they were also wise enough not to pick King Herod for their King. He is the 7<sup>th</sup> King of Jews - Herod the Great. And if it was a King of the Jews the

③ A great organizer and administrator, a genius for picking the right people to help him. He came into a time of chaos and revolution, and built up a system that gave the world order and stability for 300 years. Isn't that the kind of a king we need? Well, almost. There's no doubt of the need for order and stability, and how often we persuade ourselves that the sacrifice of something more fragile and elusive is small enough a price to pay for it.

Augustus was King of the world, and the need of the time needed him, but had to pay his price. And in his case it came pretty high. Compare Herod + Augustus